

BEYOND BRECHTIAN UNIVERSALISM?

Revolution and the Third World in Heiner Müller's *The Task*

by Hansjakob Werlen

In the widely read *Germanistik* journal *Monatshefte*, an article appeared in 1991 which passionately pleaded for a reorganization of the way German literature and culture is taught at the university. Entitled "Rethinking *Germanistik*: *Germanistik*, the Canon, and Third World Literature," its author, Georg Gugelheimer, called for the inclusion of German writers whose works reconfigure the image and concerns of Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean in this proposed revised curriculum.¹ Complementary to the new list, which includes names like Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, Peter Weiss, Hubert Fichte and Uwe Timm, authors and critics of Third World Literature, like Caryl Phillip, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Abdul R. JanMohamed and Augusto Boal ought to be read simultaneously in order to complete the disciplinary reorientation. The article grapples with the difficulties of defining Third World Literature, employing such descriptive terms as "literature of resistance," "counter hegemonic-discourse," "product of damage," as well as with the problem of delineating essential thematic or structural traits of the German texts. The German authors of the new dialogue display, according to Gugelberger, "an openness toward the Third World" and are "writing positively about the Third World."² The most important common feature claimed for these works is their aim to provide the reader with a new vision of the relationship between Europe and its former colonies.

1. Georg M. Gugelberger, "Rethinking *Germanistik*: *Germanistik*, the Canon, and Third World Literature." *Monatshefte* (1), 1991, 45-58.

2. *ibid*, 47-48.

One of the authors repeatedly linked to this type of writing is the playwright Heiner Müller who, at the time of his death in 1995, was generally considered to be the foremost dramatist in Germany. Müller was a writer in the German Democratic Republic and, next to Christa Wolf, its most famous author.

My reading and critique of Müller's play *The Task* focuses on textual representations of race and gender in the text and whether they indeed contribute to the new vision demanded by Guggelheimer.³ In *The Task*, Heiner Müller pursues a twofold aim: to unmask the imperializing nature of European revolutions and to represent the voices of the colonized as authentic alternatives to the impasse of the European "master narratives" (Enlightenment Humanism and Marxist Communism). Müller radically interrogates the Brechtian notions of revolutionary class-struggle, yet his representation of gender continues an all-too-familiar discourse written on the traditional terrain of women's bodies. As the metaphorical and allegorical representations of the body politic, woman is inscribed as castrating whore and annihilating otherness. There is a second dialectic at work in *The Task*. While Müller effectively denounces the universalizing character of the Brechtian *Lehrstück* (learning play), he engages himself in a totalizing mode of representation, a racial and geographical fundamentalism which reproduces the Brechtian class antinomies as the dual monoliths of race and gender.

The representation of political events in the Caribbean, especially the Haitian revolution, has a long tradition in German literature. Heinrich von Kleist's story *The Betrothal in Santo Domingo* is only one of many literary accounts of a revolution which had become the focal point of many European authors. The uprising in Santo Domingo, as Ray Fleming reminds us, "represented for the Romantic age one of the most remarkable events of the time."⁴ For the anti-Napoleon Prussian patriot Kleist, the successful rebellion of black slaves against the most formidable power of

3. Heiner Müller, *The Task*, in *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage*, ed. and tran. Carl Weber (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984), 85-101. All quotes are from this edition with page number indicated parenthetically.

4. See Ray Fleming, "Race and the Difference it Makes in Kleist's 'Die Verlobung in St. Domingo,'" *The German Quarterly* 65(3-4), 1992, 307. For a fuller account of how the French and Haitian Revolutions were presented in literature and the arts, see *Representing the French Revolution. Literature, Historiography, and Art*, ed. James A. W. Heffernan. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1992, especially Vève A. Clark's contribution "Haiti's Tragic Overture: (Mis)Representations of the Haitian Revolution in World Drama (1796-1975)," 237-260.

the age, France, became a symbol of possible resistance by German states to the occupying French forces.

During the 1970s, the liberation struggles of the Third World became a common denominator in the dramatic production of the German Democratic Republic. "During that decade," writes Herbert Arnold, "such otherwise disparate authors as Volker Braun, Heiner Müller, Peter Hacks, and Claus Hammel all wrote or published plays which dealt with questions of history and revolution."⁵ In the case of Müller, this new dramatic production was explicitly based on previous writing about the Third World, particularly on Brecht's plays and the Caribbean stories by Anna Seghers.

Müller wrote *The Task* (*Der Auftrag*) in 1979 and, in an author's note, stressed the thematic importance of Seghers's *The Light on the Gallows* for his own drama. The play was first performed in the studio space of the *Volksbühne* Berlin in November of 1980. Subtitled *Memory of a Revolution*, the text is a collage of scenes which tell the story of a failed revolutionary mission. The French assembly sent three emissaries to Jamaica: Debuissou, a physician and intellectual, son of a slave owner in Jamaica; Galloudec, a farmer from Brittany; and Sasportas, a former slave. Their task: "to stir up a rebellion of the slaves against the rule of the British Crown in the name of the Republic of France" (87). The news of the restoration in France calls their revolutionary work into question and the play revolves around their discussion of whether their task is forfeit without political support from France. Galloudec and Sasportas insist on the continuation of their revolutionary efforts, Debuissou fights the specter of betrayal, finally subsuming to it.

For Müller, the French revolution is "the only model for revolutions in Europe, or the — now as ever — classic model from which we can 'read' fairly accurately the progression and wrong moves of other, subsequent revolutions."⁶ When Müller speaks of "subsequent revolutions" in Europe, he implicitly also refers to the Soviet model. The depiction of the failed exportation of the eighteenth century French bourgeois revolution stands for the failed effort in the twentieth century to export the Bolshevik revolution to the Third World. That the communist Müller includes an explicit critique of the marxist notion of World Revolution in *The Task*, has been convincingly argued by Arlene Teraoka, who shows that Müller's play

5. Herbert A. Arnold, "The Third World in the Work of Volker Braun and Heiner Müller." *Seminar* 28 (May 1992), 148.

6. Quoted by Carl Weber in his introduction of the English translation of *Der Auftrag*, p. 83.

closely follows Brecht's *The Measure Taken* in structure and themes.⁷ While Brecht's text delineates the conflict between the individual and the collective, and subordinates all cultural, racial, and gender differences under the question of class and the demands of the communist revolution, Müller's representations of the three central characters in *The Task* reveal, in Teraoka's words, "the specific social and cultural identities of their bearers."⁸ Indeed, the rhetoric and actions of the three revolutionaries are defined by their socio-cultural identity: the peasant Galloudec and the former slave Sasportas display a greater sense of common purpose which separates them from the intellectual Debuissou, the head of the revolutionary trio. As members of an exploited and oppressed class, they experienced the pain of social injustice on their own bodies, while Debuissou's embrace of the revolution remains a cerebral act. He is the revolutionary leader in the mode of the Leninist vanguard, forever instructing the oppressed in the right tenets of the struggle. Teraoka's reading of *The Task* demonstrates that in Müller's play the inherent rationality and eurocentricity of the communist revolution, as presented in the Brechtian "learning play," is superseded by new voices who enounce their own unique version of indigenous struggles of liberation: "The European revolution fails in Jamaica, but the Third World revolution is born, recognizing its uniqueness and its necessary independence from the historical and ideological categories of Europe."⁹

While there can be no doubt that Müller's play thematizes the failure of European revolutionary models, the following analysis will focus on Müller's "alternative" representations of Third World revolution in the play. In *The Task*, a sudden interlinking of race and gender produces a unified chorus of voices (speaking categorically as the WOMAN and the BLACK) which addresses Debuissou as the white European oppressor. The betraying lover and former slaveholder, Debuissou is excoriated for his sexual and economic appropriations. In Müller's text, this excoriation goes to the literal roots when First Love (the symbolic representation of woman) and Sasportas, in a perceived act of re-appropriation, rhetorically obliterate Debuissou's body, beginning with the act of flaying. First Love: "With the fangs of my dogs I want to tear out of your soiled flesh the traces of my tears, my sweat, my cries of lust. With the knives of their claws cut out of your hide my wedding dress" (91). Sasportas: "Your skin. Whom did you skin for it. Your flesh is our hunger" (93). In Müller's text, the color of the

7. Arlene Akiko Teraoka, "Der Auftrag und Die Massnahme: Models of Revolution in Heiner Müller and Bertolt Brecht," *German Quarterly* (Winter), 1986, 65-84.

8. Teraoka, 74.

9. Teraoka, 80.

flogged bodies is reversed, as Sasportas indicates: "With the same whips our hands will use to write a new alphabet on other bodies" (89).

Like many other scenes in the play, the oppositional voices in this passage follow an explicit schema of reversal. The spectacle of flogging repeats the dehumanizing control over the bodies of lover and slave by Debuissou, and, as I will argue, it is exactly these mirror-reversals of the deeds of the oppressors by the oppressed that cast doubt on whether Müller really is articulating viable alternatives for Third World revolutions. The representation of such reversals and their ambivalent ethical and political nature can be found in the earliest texts on the Caribbean revolutions. In Kleist's story *The Betrothal in Santo Domingo*, a woman named Babekan, who is totally dedicated to the revolutionary struggle on Santo Domingo, attempts to eradicate all whites by reversing power relations. Seeking revenge for her own injustices by a reversal of suffering, she resembles Müller's black slave Sasportas. Fleming, while praising Babekan's "feminist" equation of the personal with the political, is nevertheless troubled by such uncompromising violence and attempts to come to terms with it by pointing to its ubiquitous universality: "Babekan is the incarnation of the modern spirit of violence, for whom murder and the mass extermination of an undifferentiated Other mask a passion for violence itself, a passion that Kleist depicts as having the power to assert itself regardless of time, place, or race."¹⁰ Roswitha Burwick sees in such a simple reversal of violence a similar political failure: "Babekan fails to achieve her goal, since the oppressed become the new oppressors, and the social hierarchy is reconstituted."¹¹

My analysis will leave aside the question of whether Müller, as a famous German dramatist, has the right to represent the Third World in his writings. This question, as Linda Alcoff's article "The Problem of Speaking for Others" demonstrates, has recently been virulently debated in academic circles, albeit often within rigid ideological parameters.¹² There can be no doubt that Heiner Müller's progressive politics propel him to engage himself with the revolutionary struggles of the Third World. In this endeavor, he is again following Anna Seghers. As Arnold writes, "Like Fanon, Müller identifies with the oppressed, most recently and emphatically in a discussion in Darmstadt in 1986," but, Arnold continues, "Müller knows that unlike Fanon he cannot really become part of the Third World and its struggles, that his race, his ideas, and his profession as a writer place

10. Fleming, 316.

11. See Roswitha Burwick, "Issues of Language and Communication: Kleist's 'Die Verlobung in Santo Domingo.'" *The German Quarterly* 65(3-4), 1992, 323.

12. Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others." *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter 1991-92), 5-32.

him outside such a process no matter how much he may empathize."¹³ Müller's understanding of history is shaped by Benjamin's *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen*, he radically breaks, as Marianne Streisand writes, "with the continuously repeated empathy with the victor."¹⁴

Let us now turn to the question of whether Müller's repeatedly professed political empathy with the oppressed translates into a successful literary-aesthetic representation of them. A recent article by Vibeke Rützou Petersen about the last Caribbean stories by Anna Seghers attempted to answer this very question.¹⁵ Petersen calls attention to the dangers inherent in any universalizing discourse on revolutions: "Moving corporeal existences into the realm of the symbolic and the metaphoric runs a risk of rendering real, physical lives invisible, of denying them their materiality."¹⁶ In the case of Müller, his metaphorical and symbolic representations of race and gender do much more than make "lives invisible." They reinscribe, I will argue, dominant clichés of culture and gender.

The reversal of hierarchies in *The Task* includes peoples of color and women, yet the metaphorical representation of gender in Müller's text continues a long tradition of Western misogyny. In the case of the great monologue by First Love, there is more than subtle irony subverting the woman's own voice. When First Love, in her fiery speech for justice, calls her rival figure Second Love, the allegorical stand-in for for the revolution, "a whore, the serpent with the bloodthirsty vulva," she iterates the dominant representations of the feminine by the male protagonists in the text. These representations have themselves a long history, and Müller, who concedes the conscious and unconscious influence of Georg Büchner's famous revolutionary play *Danton's Death* (1834) on the writing of *The Task*,

13. Arnold, 153-54.

14. Marianne Streisand, "Theater der sozialen Phantasie und der geschichtlichen Erfahrung." *Sinn und Form. Beiträge zur Literatur* 35(5), 1983, 1061. I translated the German "'mit der stets wiederholten 'Einfühlung in den Sieger.'"

15. See Vibeke Rützou Petersen, "Revolution or Colonization: Anna Segher's *Drei Frauen aus Haiti*." *The German Quarterly* 65(3-4), 1992, 396-406.

16. Petersen, 399. In her analysis, Petersen comes to a point where the whole question of whether European writers can produce truly emancipatory narratives with persons of color as protagonists becomes moot: writing in the respective European language makes the narrative product *a priori* complicitous with imperialist hegemony. She writes about Seghers' stories: "*Drei Frauen aus Haiti* is a text about colonized subjects constructed neither in the once indigenous Arawak nor in the French patois of the colonized peoples of Haiti, but in German, a language deeply rooted in European hegemonic discourse," 401.

continues Büchner's allegorical imagery of revolution, liberty, and other abstract ideas as diseased, whorish female bodies.

From the very beginning, the representation of women in the play is impersonal and allegorical. While the revolutionary who entrusted the group with the task bears a name (Antoine), woman appears in her gendered universality. Antoine calls Freedom and France whores, and the *pars pro toto* foregrounding of real or allegorical women figures always focuses on their breasts and genitals. This representational strategy of the feminine is used equally by all three revolutionaries and establishes, together with the anonymous narrator of the play, a type of unified discourse. "Debuisson in Jamaica/Between black breasts," so begins a poem by Müller written twenty years before *The Task* and entitled *Theme of A. S.* (A. S. stands for Anna Seghers). The play itself constantly evokes explicit sexual images which add a voyeuristic quality to the rhetoric of the characters, while at the same time compressing the catalogue of white political and social crimes into erotic transgressions. Through the depictions of the eroticized and diseased feminine body, male virility and domination are simultaneously confirmed and threatened.

Rather than enumerate the many instances in the text where such representations occur, I want to analyze the final image of the play, Debuisson's betrayal. While Müller repeatedly insisted that he is not passing judgment on the characters of the play ("it isn't my job to decide in favor of one of them, neither in the text nor on the stage"), it is clear that the specter of betrayal, embodied as woman, haunts the play from its very beginning. The opening passage of the play establishes the deaths of Galloudec, whose last act was to send back the unfinished task to France, and of Sasportas, who was hung at Port Royal. Debuisson, according to the letter, "is fine. It seems that traitors have a good time when the people walk in blood" (85). While the text thematizes Debuisson's ambivalence and struggle when confronted with the question of continuing the revolution or resuming a private life, the opening letter tells of the final outcome. The final scene of the text re-enacts the betrayal by depicting the encounter with Treason. It is the ultimate Medusan moment, where male agency and resolve are obliterated by gazing at the castrating female:

But Galloudec and Sasportas went away, one with the other, leaving Debuisson alone with Treason who had come up to him like the serpent from the stone. Debuisson closed his eyes against the temptation to look at the face of his first love who was Treason. Treason danced. . . Treason, her arms crossed perhaps over her breasts, or her hands placed on her hips or, by this time, grabbing her crotch, her vulva probably quivering already with lust, looked with swimming eyes at him. . . He opened his eyes. Treason smiling showed her breasts and silently spread her legs wide open, her beauty hit Debuisson like an axe. He forgot. . . clutched at the

last memory that hadn't left him yet. . . Then Treason threw herself upon him like a heaven, the bliss of the labia at dawn (100-101).

An intricate web of allusions (the serpent, the dancer, the swimming eyes) evokes the age-old cultural memory of woman as seducer and obliterating otherness. Her tools of domination are her genitals, which induce cultural and political amnesia and a state of blissful forgetting. Part voluptuous Circe, part headhunting Salome, Treason represents a composite of women's images paradigmatic since turn-of-the-century art and literature.¹⁷

It is, however, not only the representation of gender in Müller's text that follows a long pernicious European tradition. The configurations of race also fall within a well-known system of cultural coordinates in German literature. Besides these geographical and racial reversals, Müller depicts another aspect of the indigenous rebellion which has a long tradition in European representation of the other: its eruption as undifferentiated mass force. The following are Sasportas' last words:

When we the living can no longer fight, the dead will. With every heartbeat of the revolution flesh grows back on their bones, blood in their veins, life in their death. The rebellion of the dead will be the war of the landscapes, our weapons the forests, the mountains, the oceans, the deserts of the world. I will be forest, mountain, ocean, desert. I — that is Africa. I — that is Asia. The two Americas — that is I" (100).

Sasportas vision of the new revolutionary mass state includes the return to a deindividuated primordial existence, a state which is identical to nature. In her analysis of Segher's representation of Caribbean women, Petersen encounters a similar narrative strategy. Seghers "moves the Caribbean characters backwards into an animalistic realm and into an irrational and pre-enlightened discourse."¹⁸ For Müller, the notion of the subject is a historical one which can be overcome by history — especially the history of the Third World. This overcoming of the privileged subject resembles Nietzsche's vision of redemption from the malaise of reified individuality. Nietzsche is waiting for the awakening of a great mass-force, that still dormant power, a slumbering beast waiting to rise up and redeem the frozen conditions of the world. Heiner Müller reuses the Nietzschean metaphor to express his hopes in the "new animal that comes to replace

17. For an extensive study of the use of these images in turn-of-the-century art, see Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity. Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986.

18. Petersen, 399.

man" when he asks: "is this the wild, untamed, irrepressible energy of the Third World?"¹⁹

With images like this, Müller's text contributes to the remystification of Third World discourse. The adjectives "wild" and "untamed" partake of an old dichotomy which contrasts the powers of control and order with regressive indifferenciation. The solidarity evoked in Sasportas' final monologue connects the collective revolutionary struggle to the realm of nature and geographical entities, thus removing it from any particular historical contextualization. Yet solidarity, one of the dominant themes of recent Third World literary production, is always grounded in an acute awareness of particular states of inequality, injustice, and oppression, and a concomittant project of transformative social change. With this in mind, it is no coincidence that Brecht's name is most often evoked by writers in Africa, Latin America, and other places of the Third World. Not necessarily the Brecht of the learning plays, as Gugelberger points out, but Brecht the poet, seems to provide the reader with that different view which can provide moments of insight into the reality of First and Third World relations.²⁰

19. Quoted from Arlene Teraoka, *The Silence of Entropy or Universal Discourse: The Postmodern Poetics of Heiner Müller*. New York: Lang, 1985, 43.

20. Gugelberger, 51.